

# Tradition & Culture

Korea is a peninsula stretching southward from the center of the northeast coast of Asia. It is a beautiful country with a glorious history. The Korean peninsula has a land area of approximately 220,000km<sup>2</sup> and a coastline dotted with some 3,400 islands, large and small.

Korea is now the only nation on the globe remaining ideologically divided. Seventy million people of South and North Korea fervently cherish reunification with one heart. Through the historic summit meeting held recently between the leaders of South and North Korea, significant steps have begun to be taken toward cooperation and reunification.

The word 'Korea' refers to both North and South Korea, but here in the South it usually means the Republic of Korea with its population of 47 million, of whom 10 million live in the capital, Seoul. The city of Seoul boasts a 600-year history, and in 1988 it became famous throughout the world as the host of the 24th Summer Olympics. Korea will once more become a focus of worldwide attention when it co-hosts, together with Japan, the 2002 FIFA World Cup™ tournament.

The national flower of Korea is the Mugunghwa, the Rose of Sharon. As it does not shrivel quickly, its blossoms of a subtle beauty remaining in bloom for a long time, it is often used to describe the dauntless spirit of the Koreans, who have overcome many ups and downs.

The national flag of Korea is called the Taegeukgi or 'Yin-Yang Flag.' With its blue and red yin-yang symbol on a white background, and black trigrams in each corner, the Taegeukgi embodies the philosophy of the Korean people. The white background is a symbol of peace, and also stands for the purity and homogeneity of the Korean people and the white clothing traditionally worn by Korean common folk. The blue and red yin-yang symbol interlocked at the center of the flag stands for the eternal duality from which all life derives its existence. Trigrams at the corners represent heaven, earth, sun and moon, and their philosophical derivatives.

Korea enjoys a beautiful natural environment. From olden days Koreans referred to this landscape as geumsu gangsan or "a golden tapestry of rivers and mountains." The wonder of this terrain presents in each season a different prospect of picturesque scenery. In the Korean climate, spring, summer, autumn, and winter are all quite distinct, with the winter usually being rather long, summer somewhat shorter, and spring and autumn shortest of all. Rainfall is concentrated in the summer. The heavy rainy season usually comes in July in Seoul and the central regions and in August further north. In Seoul, for example, 60% of annual rainfall occurs between June and August, and 30% in July alone. This climate has had a direct influence on the lifestyle of Koreans in such aspects as location of settlements and economic activities. Although there is some regional variation, in general the production of food, clothing, and housing in Korea has been designed to defeat the cold of winter and the heat of summer.



The traditional dress of the Korean people is the hanbok. In its winter version the cloth is wadded with cotton and the trousers tied with bands at the ankles to better keep in the body heat, while the summer hanbok is made of starched hemp cloth or ramie that is freely permeable to air and maximizes the diffusion of body heat.



Korean food has also developed in response to the climate. In regions where the winter is long, special preservation techniques for vitamin-rich vegetable recipes have evolved. Kimchi is perhaps a typical example of fermented food. The fact that kimchi becomes saltier as one moves from the cold north to the warmer south is also closely related to the climate.

The influence of the climate is also seen in Korea's distinctive domestic architecture. Traditional Korean houses are equipped with ondol underfloor hypocaust heating for the winter, and in general the roofs are low, the rooms small, and the walls thick. Windows and external doors are few and small, and often made in two layers. This style of domestic architecture has clearly developed with a focus on conserving heat against the long winter. Traditional Korean houses have an open wooden-floored hall, where the family spends much of its time in the summer. While the living room is usually located at the center of the main building, the room for receiving guests is in a separate building. The kitchen is built separately and designed to serve for various kinds of work besides cooking. Traditional Korean houses can be classified according to the roofing material: thatch, tile, wood, or stone. The main framing material for houses is wood, while earth and stone are also important.

Although Korea developed an agrarian culture from an early stage in its history, the mountainous terrain gave a relatively small margin of arable land. The main crop has been rice, which requires a level field for flooding, but on gently sloped land and at the foot of mountains dry fields have also been created. For ages the staples of everyday meals have been the rice grown in paddies and the barley, other grains, and vegetables produced in dry fields. But today, alongside the traditional crops, Korean farmers raise a variety of products including livestock, flowers, fruits, and, near the sea, aquaculture products.

Indeed, in recent times Korea's economy has been considerably restructured. Since the 1960s, Korea has changed from an agriculture-dominated economy to one based on rapid industrialization. The country has gone through a revolutionary change, boosting electronics, shipbuilding, communications, and automobile industries, which has made it a model for national development worldwide. In the information and communications industry in particular, Korea today stands on the global forefront. Through their long history Koreans have created an outstanding culture, and their unique cultural heritage can be found throughout the peninsula. Koreans value learning and have won a high reputation for diligence and dedication. It was perhaps due to these traits that they were able to foster a vibrant culture thoroughly adapted to their natural surroundings.

## Korean History

Archeological findings indicated that settlement on the Korean peninsula dates back 600,000 years.

According to legend, Korea was founded in 2333 B.C. by a mythical figure named Tan'gun. The earliest Korean people are believed to have been migrants and invaders from present-day Manchuria, northern China, and Mongolia. They are believed to have been divided into large, extended kin groups and most likely practiced shamanism, a belief system that centers on worship of nature and ancestral spirits that has persisted through the centuries.

From the fourth century A.D. to the mid-seventh century A.D., three kingdoms fought for control of Korea: Koguryo in the northern part of the peninsula and Manchuria, Paekche (18B.C.) in the southwest and Shilla (57B.C.) in the southeast. As they progressed into statehood, each developed institutions of centralized power and authority.

In 668 A.D., Korea emerged as a unified political entity under the Shilla Kingdom.

The century that followed is usually described as a golden age of artistic and cultural development, as the diminished threat of invasion from the north permitted Korean scholars to travel to China and bring back advanced Chinese culture.

In the mid-eighth century, however, central authority began to decline. The Shilla Kingdom was overturned in 935 A.D. by the dynasty of Koryo, from which the name "Korea" was derived.

In 1390-91 a group of dynasty officials, allied with the newly established Ming Dynasty of China, broke the economic backbone of leading Koryo families by instituting a new land-holding system. This led to the overthrow of Koryo by the Chosun Dynasty in 1392.

The Chosun Dynasty adopted the ancient name of Chosun to claim antiquity for the Korean people, and moved the capital from Kaesong to Seoul.

The most notable intellectual achievement of the dynasty was the development in 1443 of a phonetic writing system known as Hangul. The Chosun



*People enjoy traditional games on Lunar New Year's Day.  
(Photos by Cpl. Lee Jung-hun)*



*Koreans bow to  
elders or to  
worship in the  
temple.*



Confucianism in Korea, and Confucian political and social ideals became firmly embedded in the country. Rampant factional strife, however, also became deeply rooted in Korean society especially after the 15th century.

This factionalism persisted in the Korean culture well into the mid-20th century. It divided the Chosun Dynasty's leadership and demoralized its military forces, leaving Korea defenseless against Japanese invasions in the late-16th century.

In November 1905, Korea became a Japanese colony until 1945. Korea was ruled directly from Tokyo through a governor general appointed by the Japanese emperor. Under Japanese rule all civil liberties were revoked. The Japanese closed many private schools and established their own public school system, obliterating the Korean language, to assimilate Korean youth into Japanese culture.

Nationalist sentiments were strong among Koreans, and resistance movements were formed among students, factory workers, and urban intellectuals. In 1919 the Japanese police crushed nation-wide demonstrations, in which about 370,000 Koreans participated and about 6,670 were killed.

Korea re-entered the limelight during World War II when its struggle for independence was recognized in the Cairo Declaration issued in December 1943, by the leaders of the United States, Great Britain and China.

On August 24, 1945, President Truman authorized a line of demarcation in Korea to ease the surrender of Japanese forces on the peninsula. Soviet forces accepted the surrender of Japanese troops north of the 38th parallel; and U.S. forces received those located in the south. This area soon became a hardened barrier.

In November 1947, the U.N. adopted a resolution stipulating that elected representatives of the Korea people should establish the conditions for unification and determine their own form of government. The Soviets refused to admit a U.N. commission to observe free elections in the northern half, so elections were held in May 1948, only in the southern half.

Following adoption of a new constitution, Syngman Rhee was elected president on July 20 and the

## **Etiquette and Dining**

Although many of the Koreans with whom you come into contact will be familiar with American habits and mannerisms, the traditional values are still strong.

Koreans shake hands and bow at the same time. The depth of the bow depends on the relative seniority of the two people.

When passing a gift, or any other object to someone, use both hands with bow. The right hand is used to pass the object, while the left is used in support. If the person receiving the gift is younger or lower in stature, passing with one hand is acceptable.

Koreans believe that direct eye contact during conversation shows boldness, and out of politeness they concentrate on the conversation, usually avoiding eye-to-eye contact.

You will see young men walking in the street with their arms around each other's shoulders and women walking hand-in-hand. This means nothing more than intimacy. Touching close friends while talking to them is perfectly acceptable in Korea. Koreans will touch any children to show their warm affection. This is a compliment to let the child know how cute he is. Touching other people while passing is mostly understood unless you shove him offensively.

If you attend a wedding or funeral, it's customary to take a white envelope containing a sum of money. Handing cash to someone is considered rude except when paying a shopkeeper for merchandise.

Dinner in a traditional Korean home or restaurant is quite different from American-style dining. Guests sit on cushions around a low table. Many different foods are served, each cut into bite-sized pieces. Each person has his own bowl of rice, but helps himself to other foods directly from the serving dishes. Koreans traditionally use chopsticks and a large-bowled spoon, although today forks are also used.

During the meal, rest your chopsticks and spoon on top of a dish. When you have finished eating, lay the chopsticks or spoon on the table to indicate that you have completed the meal. Never stick chopsticks or spoons in a bowl of rice; this indicates a worship of the dead. Don't worry about reaching in front of others or asking for a dish to be passed.

Republic of Korea was established on August 15, 1948. By June 1949, the U.S. withdrew all American troops except for a 500-man military advisory group. The north's leader, Kim Il-sung, seized the opportunity to unite the peninsula under his rule. Kim undertook a direct attack, sending his army south across the 38th parallel on June 25, 1950.

On June 27, 1950, the U.N. Security Council requested members of the U.N. to assist South Korea. The United States, initially responding with air and naval support, had ground forces committed by the end of the month. Eventually, 15 other nations fought under the flag of the U.N.

In July 1953, an armistice agreement brought the existing uneasy truce. The biggest problem now facing the Republic was reconstruction. The south had survived the war with freedom but little else.

President Rhee was re-elected in 1956 and again in 1960 - an election that was later proven to have been fraudulent. Tension and violence followed. The "April 19 Student Revolution," led to Rhee's resignation.

The second Republic elected Chang Myon prime minister in August 1960.

In May 1961, a military junta headed by Maj. Gen. Park, Chung-hee deposed the Chang government. The new government established a strong presidency dominating a largely subservient legislature. They also began an unprecedented program of economic development that later catapulted the ROK into the ranks of the developed industrial nations. Park retired from the army and was elected president in October 1963.

President Park was assassinated on October 26, 1979, and emergency martial law was proclaimed. Choi, Kyu-hah became the fourth president of the Republic.

Following a period of civil unrest and declaration of total martial law, Gen. Chun, Doo-hwan seized control of the Government in a coup d'état in May 1980. Chun retired and was elected the president on August 27, 1980.

The fifth five-year development plan, beginning in 1982, was suggested as an ambitious blueprint for a second stage of economic growth. The invitation of

Hostess may put your gift aside without opening it in consideration of not to embarrass you at the smallness of the gift. She'll open it if you politely ask her to.

At a restaurant, "Dutch Treat" is not customary -- Koreans just take turns in paying the bills. However, it is becoming more common among the youth. In most hotels, tips are included in the bill.

Be conscious of Korean customs and etiquette, but don't become obsessed with adopting Korean ways.

## Korean Culture

Korean culture has blossomed during her long history. Though affected by other Asian cultures, its roots lie deep within the creative Korean psyche, and it has tended to spread rather than be encroached upon. Japan especially has adopted many Korean ideas and customs. The delicate styling and fine craftsmanship of celadon pottery well illustrates the refinement of the culture, even from as far back as the Three Kingdoms Period.

Korea has also spawned some great inventors; its first printing systems predate Gutenberg's, the famous "Turtle Ship" was the first ever iron-clad battleship, and the Korean alphabet, devised by a group of scholars in the 15th century, was so effective that it remains largely unchanged today. The reasons behind Korea's rapid economic development can be found in this innate creativity.

Three Korean cultural assets to the World Heritage List designated by the UNESCO are **Chongmyo Shrine**, where memorial services to the Kings of 500-hundred-years history of Chosun Dynasty is held; **The Great Changgyong-Pan** in Haeinsa Temple, which engraved Buddhist scripture on 80,000 pieces of wooden panels; and **Pulguksa Temple** and **Sokkuram Grotto** in Kyongju which was built 1,000-years ago.

## Korean Names

Koreans place the family name first, and the given personal name second. Family names are traditional clan names and each has a village from which it comes. Thus, there is a difference between Kim who comes from Kyong-ju and Kim who from Kimhae.

The five most frequent names are Kim, Pa(r)k, Yi, Choi (Choe) and Oh. Because of the inconsistencies of translating names from Hangul to Roman characters

Olympics to Seoul advanced the international status of Korea and elevated the people's pride.

Retired General Roh, Tae-woo was elected president through the first direct popular vote in 16 years.

This 6th Republic ended perennial domestic and international controversy over the legitimacy of the Republic of Korea government and set the stage for the successful hosting of the Seoul Olympics and the effective implementation of northern diplomacy aimed at opening and expanding ties with the socialist world.

The seventh Republic came into being in February 25, 1993 by president Kim, Young-sam. President Kim's election marked a significant milestone in modern Korean history--the first popularly-elected civilian government in 32 years.

Korean democracy further matured in 1998, with the election of Kim, Dae-jung, an opposition candidate, in the first successful transition of governmental authority in Korean history.

spellings of these names vary. For instance, Yi is also spelled in English as Lee and Rhee.

If at all possible, Koreans avoid calling a person directly by his name. Instead they use his title, position, trade, profession, scholastic rank or some honorific form such as "teacher." Parents often are addressed as the equivalent of "Jimmy's mommy" or "Susie's daddy," rather than "Mrs. Kim."

## **KOREAN CULTURAL LINKS**

### **Korea Tour Home Page**

**Includes a bulletin board, weekly events, touring destinations throughout the Republic, cultural festivals and the like.**

<http://english.tour2korea.com/>

### **Seoul Focus**

**(Seoul Metropolitan Government)**

**Find out everything you wanted to know about Seoul, to include entertainment, customs, the weather and the current Won-Dollar exchange rate.**

<http://www.metro.seoul.kr/intro.html>

### **Korean Embassy, Washington, D.C.**

**Valuable information on visas, worldwide embassy and consulate locations and more!**

<http://www.koreaembassy.org/>

### **American Embassy, South Korea**

<http://usembassy.state.gov/seoul/>

### **Gunsan City**

<http://www.gunsan.go.kr/english/>

## Korean Language

Koreans consider their own written language, Hangul, as their most distinctive trait.

Korean language, Hangung-mahl, is closer to Hungarian, Finnish or Turkish than it is to other Oriental languages.

Although they have their own efficient phonetic alphabet invented in the 15th Century, they use Chinese ideographs for some proper names and technical terms.

During your tour in Korea, you'll have ample opportunity to study the Korean language. Many bases have free on-duty or off-duty language classes.

English is taught in Korean schools as a first foreign language. When you talk to Koreans in English, speak slowly to increase your chances of being understood.

If you still have difficulties getting your message across, write it down using short words. If this fails, simply show the phrases written in one of the many available phrase books.

The following Korean phrases may assist you during your visit to Korea.

Good morning/afternoon/evening.

**Ahn-nyong ha-seh-yo?**

I'm glad to meet you.

**Mahn-nah-so bahn-gah-wo-yo.**

Good-bye. (by host)

**Ahn-nyong-hee kah-seh-yo.**

Good-bye. (by guest)

**Ahn-nyong-hee kay-seh-yo.**

May I have your name?

**Ee-ru-mee moo-ot-shim-nee-ka?**

How much does it cost? (How much is the fare?)

**Ol-mah eem-nee-ka?**

I'll take this.

**Ego ju-seh-yo.**

Do you speak English?

**Young-oh hahm-nee-ka?**

.

I don't speak English well.

**Young-oh Jahl mot-hahm-nee-dah**

Please take me to the nearest U.S. military installation.

**Kah-kah-woon mee-koon boo-dae-ro**

**kahp-she- dah.**

What is this?

**Ee-gut-sun moo-ot-shim-nee-ka?**

Thank you.

**Kahm-sa Ham-nee-dah.**

You're welcome.

**Chon-mahneyo.**

What is this place called?

**Yo-gee-gah o-deem-nee-ka?**

I want to get off in Itaewon.

**Itaewon-eh-so neh-ryo ju-seh-yo.**

Stop here.

**Yo-gee se-wo ju-seh-yo.**

Please wait for a moment.

**Jahm-kahn-mahn Kee-dah-ree-seh-yo.**

Go straight ahead.

**Dok-bah-ro kah-seh-yo.**

Which way do I need to go?

**Onu-jo-ku-ro kahm-nee-ka?**

It is very delicious.

**Ah-ju mah-sheet-so-yo.**

Bathroom/toilet

**Yok-shil/Hwa-jahng-shil**

What time is it?

**Naeng-soo hahn-john ju-seh-yo.**

Please give me an English menu.

**Myot she eem-nee-ka?**

Please give me a glass of cold water

Please give me an English menu.

**Young-oh menu chom ju-seh-yo.**

Western-style room

Korean-style room

**Cheem-dae bahng**

**On-dol bahng**

Hot water

Cold water

Rice

**On-soo**

**Naeng-soo**

**Bahb**

Meal

Bill

Reservation

**Shik-sah**

**Keh-sahn-soh**

**Ye-yahk**

Dining room

Room charge

**Shik-dahng**

**Sook-bahng-ryo**

It is hot (spicy).

It is hot (temperature).

**Mae-wo-yo.**

**Ttugoh-wo-yo.**